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Graduate Academic Symposium

Graduate School

Spring 5-3-2019

The Social-Emotional Needs of Student-Athletes: Reviewing What We Know

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Recommended Citation

Zubik, Jenna, "The Social-Emotional Needs of Student-Athletes: Reviewing What We Know" (2019). *Graduate Academic Symposium*. 58.
<https://scholar.valpo.edu/gas/58>

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Abstract

This study is a meta-analysis that explores the social and emotional needs of amateur student-athletes at both high school and collegiate levels. This study includes a review of 52 scholarly articles. A qualitative analysis using the coding system of open codes, axial codes, and selective themes was conducted in order to determine the most salient social and emotional needs of student-athletes. The four themes are: mental health issues, identity, social support, and transition.

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA; 2007) identified the major mental health issues of student-athletes as depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and substance-related disorders. While student-athletes engaged in sports may display less hopelessness characteristics (Chioqueta & Stiles, 2007), depression in student-athletes may result from a variety of reasons. These include lack of playing time, injury, or overtraining (NCAA, 2007). Stress and anxiety may stem from athletic expectations, maintaining academic performance, or from the transition of leaving home and living in a dorm (NCAA, 2007). The pressures of sport may also increase body dissatisfaction (Anderson, Petrie, & Neumann, 2012). This, particularly in female student-athletes, may lead to eating disorders (NCAA, 2007). Research on the prevalence and effect of substance use with student-athletes shows that they may use substances that are legal, illegal, prescription, over-the-counter, or performance-enhancing (NCAA, 2007).

Student-athletes' identities are often derived from their experiences and success when in the athletic role (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993). A strong athletic identity can be beneficial. For example, Miller and Hoffman (2009) reported that participants associated with athlete identity were less likely to experience depressive symptoms than those who viewed themselves as "jocks" and competed purely for notoriety and social benefits. Furthermore,

Armstrong and Oomen-Early (2009) demonstrated student-athletes have higher levels of self-esteem than their non-athlete peers. However, when transitioning out of sport, athletes can struggle redefining themselves due to their prior exclusive athletic identities (Beamon, 2012). Therefore, decreasing student-athletes' reliance on athletic identities may prevent a major identity crisis or confusion upon athletic retirement (Lally, 2007).

Social support is important for student-athletes. Tiedens (2016) found female undergraduate students reported more social support sources along with a higher satisfaction of the support. Students who experienced an injury had greater social support sources as well as higher satisfaction of the support. For injured students, enhancing hope perceptions and strengthening social support during rehabilitation are beneficial to behavior and subjective well-being (Lu & Hsu, 2013). Social support may also lead to the reduction of depressive symptoms. Yang et al. (2014) found athletes who were satisfied with their social support were 70% less likely to report depressive symptoms than athletes who were not satisfied with their support.

At some point, student-athletes must transition out of being an athlete for their affiliated school. In some cases, transition results from a burnout. Research shows burnout may be related to perceived stress, general coping behaviors, and social support satisfaction (Raedeke & Smith, 2004). This highlights the commonalities among the identified themes. Strong social supports and an emphasis on mental health and identity formation are necessary components of successful student-athlete transitions.

Keywords: student-athletes, mental health, athletic identity, social support, athletic transition

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